

Brian Ward, *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (London: University College London Press, 1998), 576 pp. ISBN: 0-520-212-983, paper; \$24.95.

Race relations in the United States changed profoundly between the early 1950s and the late 1970s. Contemporaneous with the chief impetus to change – the various boycotts, sit-ins, voter registration drives, freedom rides, and marches known collectively as the civil rights movement – were the commercial successes of artists and labels that performed, produced, and marketed musical genres closely associated with African American culture. First rhythm and blues, then soul, and later funk attained unprecedented levels of popularity with both black and white audiences and record buyers during the period. The accomplishments of Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, James Brown and others as performers, and of Atlantic, Stax, Motown, and numerous Independents as labels, seemed to provide a

2. Juan Bruce-Novoa, *Retrospace. Collected Essays on Chicano Literature, Theory, and History* (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1990).

popular cultural version of the gradual shift from racial segregation via desegregation to integration: one of the many goals and achievements of the civil rights movement. Individuals involved in the civil rights movement and those in the music industry did not work in vacuums, unaware of or uninfluenced by one another's efforts. Indeed, Dick Gregory once captured the importance of the music for the foot soldiers of the movement when he observed that while movement volunteers heard the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. at most once a day on television on the evening news, they heard Aretha Franklin on the radio every hour.

How the civil rights movement and the prosperity of rhythm and blues, soul, and funk music might have been interrelated is the chief subject of Brian Ward's *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations*, a *New York Times Book Review* Notable Book for 1998. A Reader in American History at the University of Newcastle Upon Tyne in Britain, Ward adopts two major approaches to his material: social and cultural history and textual analysis. Building on his knowledge of the era and the civil rights movement (he co-edited *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement* with Tony Badger in 1996), Ward's main approach is that of a historian. Ever aware of the complexity of his subject, he produces a highly readable and informative narrative gleaned from a wealth of archival, interview, and secondary material. He moves deftly between, on the one hand, socio-historical-political concerns and events of the civil rights movement, and, on the other, specific developments within the music industry that produced rhythm and blues, soul, and funk, often bridging the two areas by viewing the music as a consumer product and its fans as consumers. While he is interested in the effects of the music on white consumers, the bulk of his narrative delineates the music's effects on black consumers. Thus, he focuses on the operations of black-oriented radio stations and record labels; and on the careers of the black artists who performed the music, especially the entrepreneurial aspects of their careers and their participation in the civil rights movement.

One particular strength of the book is Ward's close attention to the role black-oriented radio stations played in numerous black communities across the United States. He describes in great detail the contributions of black disc jockeys in promoting the emerging genres (as the stations themselves adopted those genres as their formats) and in connecting the music to the events of the period. This did not go unnoticed by leaders of the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. addressed disc jockeys and television announcers at an NATRA (National Association of Television and Radio Announcers) convention in 1967, telling them:

you have paved the way for social and political change by creating a powerful, cultural bridge between black and white. School integration is much easier now that they have a common music, a common language, and enjoy the same dances. You introduced youth to that music and created a language of soul and promoted the dances which now sweep across race, class and nation (232).

Ward carefully balances King's enthusiasm with remarks made by white rhythm and blues fans and musicians from the 1960s which expose their persistent racism despite their ardor.

Nonetheless, Ward believes that rhythm and blues played a part in changing the racial attitudes of Americans, if only by reinforcing the beliefs of those in the movement and outside it – black and white – that the music did matter and could have an effect, and that the people who wrote, performed, and produced it were deserving of respect and equality.

The support black label executives and owners and recording stars gave to the movement took a variety of forms: musicians organized and performed benefit concerts (Ward singles out the numerous efforts of Sammy Davis, Jr. and Harry Belafonte), and there was both direct participation in marches, such as the 1963 March on Washington (vocalist Lena Horne and gospel legend Mahalia Jackson), and financial aid to civil rights organizations. One of Ward's main theses, though, is that rhythm and blues and soul artists were largely absent from the civil rights movement until the late 1960s. Ward cites Billy McKinney, an Atlanta Democrat first elected to the Georgia House of Representatives in 1972, who noted that these artists 'were not leaders, just musicians. They were not role models ... we just didn't expect them to put anything [back] in the community' (335). But if rhythm and blues, soul, and funk stars failed to 'put anything [back] in the community,' politically or socially, Ward would like to argue that rhythm and blues and soul artists did in fact give much to black and white Americans culturally by way of their music.

Ward analyzes rhythm and blues, soul, and funk lyrics to bolster his assertion that the music significantly influenced changes in race relations in post-war American society. His reading of Chuck Berry's 'The Promised Land' (1964), which maps the itinerary of the song's protagonist with eventful stops made by the Freedom Riders, is intriguing (213). Ward nicely gives credit to the often overshadowed Curtis Mayfield: important both for writing songs such as 'Keep on Pushing' (1964), 'People Get Ready' (1965), and 'We're a Winner' (1968) which addressed the issues the movement raised, and for his entrepreneurial success with his Independent label, Curtom (422). Ward's encyclopedic familiarity with rhythm and blues, soul, and funk singles and LP cuts enables him to bring to the fore artists such as Joe Tex, whose work is not typically associated with social commentary but who indeed cut tracks such as 'Love You Save (May Be Your Own)' (1966), whose litany of abuse suffered foreshadowed the social commentary which would not be commonplace until the end of the decade. To make his case that rhythm and blues, soul, and funk lyrics were expressive of beliefs, attitudes, and values widespread in black communities, Ward draws on an article written in 1966 by Rolland Snellings which 'proclaimed Rhythm and Blues a potent weapon in the black freedom struggle' (289). Ward notes that Snellings and other commentators:

were absolutely right to claim that the hopes and dreams, fears and frustrations, of ordinary blacks were expressed and embodied in the various forms of Rhythm and Blues. Black popular music and dance reflected, encoded, and, through radio, records, dances and tours, helped to nationalize the new black pride and consciousness which was inextricably linked, cause and effect, to the emergence of a viable mass campaign for black civil and voting rights (290).

But Ward is at pains to emphasize that not only lyrics with 'social' or 'political' lyrics had an important effect on attitudes during the years of the movement.

What, finally, is one to make of the concurrent emergence and success of the civil rights movement and the popularity of rhythm and blues, soul, and funk music in post-war America? *Just My Soul Responding* documents how key players in the socio-political and popular cultural spheres influenced one another, significantly.

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